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ABSTRACT

This report describes two studies completed by the Child Advocacy Commission of Durham, North Carolina. The Durham school system has one of the lowest retention rates of any system in the state. The studies were used to advocate for and help implement new and better dropout prevention strategies in their schools. The report also outlines the need for: reliable, accessible sources of data and records on specific existing local programs; programs that are evaluated using matched control groups and longitudinal results; and syntheses of research on major educational experiments. Ways researchers can work to have their findings implemented in the schools through community education and support are suggested. (MD)

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ADVOCACY AND THE LINK BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Lanier Rand Fonvielle

The scarce and dwindling resources which constrain the options of local public school programs constitute a do-or-die mandate to policy makers, planners, and analysts to help educators choose the most effective, efficient, and equitable means to achieve their goals. Of course, if theory (no matter how promising) and empirical findings (no matter how robust) are employed only within the confines of universities and non-local agencies, timely research will not make an impact on daily practice in our schools.

Effective advocacy can bridge the gap. The first step in making a lasting change in local schools is to develop a constituency either within or outside the system, or preferably, both. This constituency must gain enough power to persuade decision makers to change priorities, methods, or the way they allocate our resources. The power to make institutional changes can take several forms, including money, the political pressure of numbers, or force. Surely one of the most constructive forms of power that advocates in education can use is one of information.

In this paper we will first describe two studies the Child Advocacy Commission of Durham recently completed to argue for and help implement new and better dropout prevention strategies in our schools. We will conclude with a message about what we as advocates need from researchers in order to put your ideas to work.

Durham's school system has one of the lowest retention rates of any system in our state, yet we spend the most local dollars per pupil. Part of the

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problem is that the city system predominantly serves very poor, minority students whose parents had few educational opportunities, but this is not unusual in North Carolina. Over 18 percent of all Durham's adults over age 25 attended less than eight years of school, and for parents of city school children, this proportion is doubtless much higher. We view the disadvantages the children bring to school with them as a justification for intensifying dropout prevention efforts.

In the spring of 1981, the members of the Juvenile Justice Committee of the Durham Child Advocacy Commission decided to study the problem of truancy in our community. They reasoned that students who are frequently absent from school in lower grades and middle school, predictably enough, often drop out of school. Truancy may also be a sign of less obvious problems that cause children to miss school; they may, for example, lack basic needs or parental support; they may for some reason be unable to cope with their school experience; or they may be delinquent. Thus the Committee sees truancy as a serious problem itself, one that often means a student is dealing with other even more serious difficulties.

Our first report, "Needs Individual Attention," presents an overview of the problem of truancy, and then describes a group of Durham adolescents enrolled in city and county schools who were reported to be truant during 1979-80. The report includes a review of state laws and state and local policies regarding truancy. The legal jurisdiction of the court and the schools is described. There is a summary of research on causes of truancy followed by detailed descriptions of existing programs and approaches in our public schools and community agencies designed to combat excessive absenteeism. A brief discussion of programs to reduce truancy focuses on the necessity for approaches that recognize the essential roles of both home and school in promoting students' success in

school. Here are some of our findings.

°When the Committee analyzed the records of 209 truant students who were in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades in 1978-79, they documented that over three-fourths of these students had dropped out of school altogether by 1981-82.

°Most of these students dropped out in the ninth grade at age 15 or 16.

°The schools do not use uniform criteria to identify truant students or to report them to attendance officers or school social workers. These criteria are specified in state law.

°Over half of these students had scored below the 25th percentile on achievement tests in the third and sixth grades. Their grades tended to drop after the sixth grade. Two-thirds of these students were retained in the seventh grade.

°Those truant students who were still enrolled in 1981-82 were more likely to have been retained before grade seven, and were less likely to have been frequently absent in grades four through six.

°Thirty percent of the city schools' truant students had been reported to Social Services for protective services. Abuse, abandonment, or neglect (usually neglect) complaints were most frequently filed when these students were in the fifth grade or later.

°Of 274 truants identified by schools in Durham, one received services for status offenders through referral to juvenile court for a truancy offense alone.

°Over 40 percent of city schools truants had been arrested or investigated for a delinquent offense. Three-fourths of these students were referred to juvenile court.

°Truant students are equally likely to be male or female.

Based on these findings, the Committee identified unmet student needs and ranked them in order of priority. First, they recommended intensifying and giving higher priority to early identification and prevention of learning problems and other factors that cause children to later stop attending school. Second, efforts to retain truants in middle school need to be made. Third, the Committee stressed the need for schools to keep better records and to systematically refer students to services they need, both within the school system and in the community.

Next the Committee presented the report to school administrators and pupil services personnel for their responses and suggestions. We consulted staff members of other community agencies that serve children, especially the courts. In these meetings we decided on a two-pronged approach. First, we would set up one model truancy/dropout prevention project in an elementary school and one in a middle school. Second, we would focus on an improved system-wide approach to records and referrals. Our strategy was based on the discussions of our report, an assessment of the school system's recent history with attempted innovations, and caveats developed by other consultants and researchers who have attempted to implement system changes in schools.

Clearly the first big problem was what sort of models we would advocate, given limited resources and time. What theory of dropout causes would we depend on? What strategy would have the best chance of generating immediate results compelling enough to convince educators to integrate it in longer range plans? Most importantly, among the wide range of options, each with its own constituency, which ones work to educate these students? How could we convince seasoned educators to give another try to a task most felt was doomed from the start?

We needed fast, timely, quality, cheap program evaluation material, and we were in luck. With a review of basic research, a search of ERIC files, and the findings of two recent policy research reports we were able to produce a controversial but convincing report on dropout intervention strategies for adolescent truants. (These two studies are Delinquency Prevention Theories and Strategies, 1980, by Grant Johnson, Tom Bird, Judith Warren Little, and Sylvia Beville for the US Justice Department Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, with working papers on implementation, and Dennis A. Romig's 1978 Justice For Our Children.)

However, the early preventive approaches are apparently not nearly so clearly specified in theory, or especially in practice. Based on the tremendous boost the middle school intervention study gave our implementation efforts and our community lobbying success, what we now need is to develop a preventive approach that we can confidently and successfully advocate for elementary schools that serve high proportions of students who seem to be at risk of dropping out.

First we need a tested synthesis of evaluative theory that hypothesizes what school-based programs work best and why. Children's policy theorists Ogbu, de Leone, and Kenniston, funded by the Carnegie Foundation, provide a compelling critique of society and education. To draw their findings into the local school context is difficult but, we think, necessary. Still what we need is a clearer definition of what the school's role can be. What is the action response? What does work? In our schools and city, the scarcity of resources compared to the children's basic unmet needs creates a rational and debilitating sense of futility among elementary school educators. We need good models for the many parts of early school success - parent involvement, reading, meeting special needs, community involvement - because there are so many methods and they are not all equally efficient, effective, and equitable.

To make impact on practice, advocates and program planners need research that can be summarized by three "C's":

Context
Controls, and
Comparisons.

Context. We must have reliable, accessible sources of data and records on specific existing local programs--on children's progress and participation, on what is provided in terms of quality and quantity, on what is missing. We need to know the history of what has been tried and what happened. We have to have an intimate familiarity with personalities and politics, on both petty and grand scales. To know the context is a specialty advocates must develop to a fine art, and professional researchers can contribute in at least two ways.

First, document experiences with models of implementation. Second, provide baseline data and set up recordkeeping systems for schools that minimize daily hassles and maximize useable information outcomes. If we ask schools to provide records, that is taking time from teaching, so they ought to be more useful to that teacher and that school system than they are arduous to produce.

Controls. A search for preventive early education programs that are evaluated using matched control groups and longitudinal results is like looking for needles in a haystack. Our own study of truancy suffers from lack of available data on a control group that could generate information about correlating factors or system-wide scope of the problem. Our findings were so striking and disturbing that usually we present them and people in the audience don't think to ask about controls. But for advocacy based on research, we need them, and the tomes of unproven neat ideas for new approaches that appear in educational publications too often take much more time to sift through than they are worth. We have to have some strong evaluations to make changes. For political purposes, but more importantly for program integrity, we need to know what the factors and methods are that have been tested and that can be changed in schools.

Comparisons. We need syntheses of the volumes of research on major educational experiments like Head Start, Follow Through, various reading programs and remedial and early identification and intervention efforts in an abridged, readable form. Then we need to compare the abundant supply of approaches with each other in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, equity and longitudinal impacts. This research has been expensive to do, but it has to be cheap and accessible for advocates and schools to use it.

Dennis Romig's 1978 book Justice For Our Children is an example of comparative approaches to rehabilitation. To do a comparable piece on preventive approaches would, it seems, be much more challenging. It would mean integrating theories from various disciplines, uncovering the essential ingredients in successful strategies, and following up on longitudinal impacts for cost-effective preventive strategies. We need that.

It would be most helpful if this great gift came to us in a form we can readily adapt to our context. What must be done and untampered with to get the results? What aspects can be negotiated according to the views of various interests? Give us your results, program evaluations structures, specifics, and robust theoretical explanations that we can sell to schools, parents and the community.

Advocates wear many hats, and in most communities you can't just look them up in the yellow pages. It is worth the effort, however, for researchers to ferret out parents, local leaders in organizations, teachers, and political decision-makers

who will spend some time with you thinking about implementation issues and processes. They can help you get your results transformed into policy by broadening community education and support.

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